

Columnists

## Behind The Headlines

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### More questions than answers



By Bunn Nagara

While there is no doubt that shooting down MH17 was a grave crime, everything else remains uncertain.



*Dangerous devices: The Russian rocket system 'Buk-M2' on display during the MAKS 2011 airshow in the town of Zhukovsky, outside Moscow in this file photo. – EPA*

ALL the big questions about MH17 began only after the passenger jet fell from the sky and crashed to the ground.

Up to that point, everything about it was routine and unspectacular: leaving Amsterdam's Schiphol airport at a quarter past noon (6.15pm Malaysian time) on Thursday, it was scheduled to arrive at KLIA early Friday morning.

Flying at a cruising altitude of 10km over Ukraine, it was 300m above a closed airspace over a zone of conflict. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) had confirmed this was an established altitude for commercial aircraft.

Then at 10.15pm Malaysian time on Thursday, radio contact was abruptly lost. All the necessary answers for the fate of the plane also began from that point.

From there, uncovering the truth becomes a tedious and messy business. Among the challenges is that while politics should not interfere in investigations, just about everything in the politics of Ukraine comes wrapped within that tragedy.

For a start, all three principals in eastern Ukraine's bitter conflict – the Ukraine government, pro-Russia separatists and Russia – deny any responsibility for downing MH17. Yet one of these parties has to be directly responsible for it.

Shooting down the aircraft by whatever means is a deliberate act of murder and destruction. The question that follows is whether the perpetrator did so in ignorance, mistaking MH17 for an enemy aircraft, or as a terrorist in the knowledge that it was a civilian plane.

Denial is familiar and predictable, especially for such a dastardly act and an international tragedy on such a scale. It serves two immediate purposes: avoiding blame, and damning the enemy further by shifting blame there.

As reliable information trickles in or not at all, the effective knowledge vacuum sucks in more predictable allegations and denials.

The resulting mass of claims, counter-claims, assumptions, suppositions, conjectures and fabrications form yet another unwelcome barrier to investigations.

In the absence of a forthright and verifiable admission of guilt, all three parties should be suspect.

The lack of reliable information only complicates the task of investigation, particularly at a time when all who seek the truth must be particularly prudent and patient.

Each of the three parties has its own mix of deniability and culpability. That makes any investigation even more difficult.

Identifying the guilty party and building a case against it depend on the known facts of the tragedy. Investigations then proceed as more facts become available – known, then verified, and then established.

MH17 was attacked in Ukrainian airspace and crashed near the village of Grabovo and the town of Torez in the eastern province of Donetsk, some 50km from the Russian border.

Local eyewitnesses said they saw a plane falling and hearing two explosions before the aircraft crashed to the ground and broke into two. Some debris was strewn over a 700km radius, with the bulk of the wreckage found within a tight 100m radius of the crash spot.

Separatist rebels blame the Ukrainian government, the government blames the rebels, and some in Kiev even allege a Russian hand – acting independently, or more plausibly in assisting the rebels.

What are the known indications so far? These depend on the kind of attack or weapon system used.

To both Ukraine and the private Russian news agency Interfax from the start, MH 17 was downed by a BUK missile. How could they be so certain when everything about the crash was still murky?

BUK missiles come in a set of four laser-guided, medium-range surface-to-air projectiles mounted on a tank or truck, with an altitude range of 22km to 30km. They travel at up to four times the cruising speed of a civilian aircraft.

The BUK (also known as the SA-11) is a Russian-made missile system used by both Ukraine and Russia. The rebels' "standard" shoulder-launched missiles do not have anywhere near that range.

However, that does not clear the rebels necessarily.

There have been reports in recent days that rebels had taken over a Ukrainian military base in the area that housed the BUK missile system.

Other reports tell of Ukrainian forces having lately pushed back the rebels in eastern Ukraine and limited their room for manoeuvre.

How strong the rebels actually were in the territory where MH17 was attacked on Thursday is still unclear, that itself being indicative of the uncertainties that prevail.

Another missile "of choice" alleged to have been used on MH17 is the SA-17 or "Grizzly", which has an 11% greater altitude range. Both missile systems operate more independently than more sophisticated Russian missile systems which can distinguish between civilian and military aircraft.

A local resident who saw the crash however said MH17 could also have been downed by a jet fighter.

Two implications follow from that: the attacker must have known the target was a civilian aircraft, and a national air force would have been responsible.

If a fighter jet had been involved, it would explain the tight debris field that some observers had noted.

It would also be consistent with witness reports of the plane breaking up upon crashing rather than disintegrating in the air.

Another version of events, reportedly from a Russian source, is that a (Ukrainian) Sukhoi Su-25 fighter jet had shot down MH17 and the rebels then shot down the assailant.

While that may explain some rebels' remarks about having downed an aircraft at the time, it is too convoluted – even convenient – to be credible.

Such a scenario would mean the Ukrainian air force had been responsible. Russian-made Sukhois are used by both Russia and Ukraine, since Ukraine had been a part of the former Soviet Union.

The closest thing to a “smoking gun” piece of evidence within hours of the tragedy was the SBU's (Ukrainian intelligence service's) claimed possession of a recorded phone intercept of a conversation between some rebels and Russians.

Allegedly, a group of local Cossacks near the Chernukhin checkpoint were said to be the perpetrators. MH17 was apparently mistaken for an AN-26 Ukrainian transport plane, which rebels in eastern Ukraine had downed before.

Amid all the speculation and finger-pointing however, the consensus is that a missile or missiles had hit MH17. And the most likely perpetrators were a group of rebels in the area.

Conventional wisdom also says that this makes it more difficult for Russia to handle the situation. The reality could well be the opposite.

After Crimea (the autonomous republic of Crimea and Sevastopol) left Ukraine to join Russia earlier this year, rebels in eastern Ukraine had agitated to do likewise.

However, they have proven to be a diplomatic headache and embarrassment for Russia. Unlike Crimea, eastern Ukraine is a contiguous part of Ukraine politically and historically, even if the area also has numerous ethnic Russians like Crimea.

Moscow has thus been loath to see any part of Ukraine take the Crimea route, much as that may please Russian ultra-nationalists. Thus the civil war in Ukraine, concentrated as it is in the eastern provinces.

The rebels have since chafed at Moscow's unwillingness to annex their territory. But if they are now seen to have committed a grave international crime in downing a civilian aircraft, the infamy presents Russia with the best opportunity yet to cut them off for good.

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